

Hawaii Business Online

Jolly Green Giant

The Mauna Lani Resort continues to build environmental systems that are good for business

By Kelli Abe Trifonovitch

"It's a terrorist turtle," jokes Riley Saito, vice president and controller of Mauna Lani Resort Operation Inc. The turtle pictured on his computer screen isn't really a terrorist. It sports a rather large, global-positioning satellite transmitter on the back of its shell, which has helped the National Marine Fisheries Service track the animal for 251 days. The turtle is just one of the many projects that have earned the resort environmental kudos. The Mauna Lani has the largest photovoltaic energy system (used to capture solar energy) of any resort in the world.

Not bad for a Hawaii "big business." Mauna Lani's operations (there is also the Mauna Lani Realty, Mauna Lani Service and Mauna Lani S. T. P.) had 2001 gross sales of \$50.8 million, making it No. 140 on Hawaii Business' Top 250 list.

The Mauna Lani is home to: a photovoltaic system on the hotel and on the golf maintenance facility; a solar tracking system that pumps the resort's brackish water from its own wastewater treatment plant; and a Suncaddy Solar-powered fleet of more than 100 golf carts. The resort itself has the potential to generate about 500 kilowatts, the equivalent of powering 500 single-family homes. There are plans to add another 200 kilowatts soon.

About half of the golf course's operations, including a warehouse and air-conditioned clubhouse, are powered by photovoltaics. Saito says electricity costs on the golf side have remained flat since 1998, while the hotel operation (which uses a minimal amount of solar power) has seen electricity costs rise up to 20 percent with skyrocketing oil prices.

"What the photovoltaics do, especially as partners with the state tax credit [35 percent] and the federal tax credit [10 percent], it's truly government being a partner with private businesses to protect the long-term environment in Hawaii," Saito says.

The solar energy helps to pump brackish water from the Mauna Lani's wastewater treatment plant to grow palm trees for sale, water the golf course and grow seashore paspalum (a golf turf grass that thrives on brackish water and requires little or no fertilizer) for sale. The effluent is also used to water down green waste that is recycled into compost.

Saito says, "Ninety percent of the green waste on this resort of 3,200 acres is composted, and we don't get any credit from the county for landfill diversion. Zero. We operate [a compost business] because

we don't lose money on it."

He says the Mauna Lani's environmental bent started with the founders and has been perpetuated by its parent company, Japan-based Tokyu Group. The group's mission statement reads: "We will create a beautiful living environment, where each person can pursue individual happiness in a harmonious society."

The Mauna Lani has also rebuilt ancient fishponds on the grounds and is raising moi for broodstock for the Oceanic Institute. One of the hotel's higher-profile projects is its annual Fourth of July Independence Day Celebration, where young Hawaiian green sea turtles that have been growing in hotel ponds are released to the ocean.

Not every business has the luxury of working with more than 3,000 acres, much less a sun-intensive, oceanfront property. But Saito says there are many possibilities with new technologies, such as photovoltaic panels that can provide shade to parked cars. "Imagine if you had that at the Ala Moana Shopping Center," he says. "Everyone wants to park in the shade. Why not have it produce electricity? At the Aloha Stadium, you'd probably get enough to run the stadium if you covered the whole parking lot."

This numbers cruncher says that if businesses are willing to take small steps today, the impact would be big. Says Saito, "Look at it. Invest in it, because it makes sense. The latest [photovoltaic project] we're doing is an immediate, positive cash flow. So why wouldn't you do it?"

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